

Harvesting Stories: A Qualitative Analysis of Farmers' and Labor Contractors' Experiences with
Migrant Labor in the Southeast United States

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Science
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

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May 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout this journey. First and foremost, I am grateful to my Graduate Advisor and Committee Chair, Dr. Shelli Rampold, for her invaluable guidance, encouragement, and unwavering support. I thank my Graduate Committee members, Dr. Tom Gill and Dr. Emily Paskewitz, for their insightful feedback and contributions to this work. I am also thankful to the ALEC Department, especially Dr. Stripling and Mrs. Ownby, for her planning/organizational skills. Additionally, Mrs. Victoria Beasley offered much support and help along the way. My heartfelt appreciation goes to all the former students, academic mentors, non-academic mentors, and friends who provided encouragement and assistance along the way. I am profoundly grateful to my sister Kylie for her love, encouragement, and belief in me. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, Rantz and Stephanie, for their continued support and love as I know that none of this would have been possible without them.

ABSTRACT

This study explores the critical role of migrant labor in the agricultural operations of the Southeastern United States, focusing on the challenges faced by both farmers and migrant labor contractors. The central research questions address the experiences of agricultural producers who rely on migrant labor to manage seasonal shortages and the impact of various economic, political, and regulatory challenges on their operations. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with agricultural producers, including those in animal products, fruit and vegetable operations, and forage/fiber producers, as well as migrant labor contractors. The findings reveal that migrant labor is essential for maintaining farm productivity, especially during peak harvest periods. The findings also reveal significant obstacles such as rising labor costs, bureaucratic inefficiencies in the H-2A visa process, and political uncertainties regarding immigration reform. Contractors also face logistical challenges, including inadequate housing, restrictive regulations, and discrimination against workers. These issues compound the financial strain on agricultural operations, particularly for smaller farms. The study concludes that comprehensive policy reforms are necessary, including expanding the H-2A visa program to accommodate year-round labor for industries like dairy farming, streamlining visa application processes, regulating labor costs, and exploring alternative labor models such as automation and local workforce development. Recommendations also stress the need to address social stigma surrounding migrant labor and improve housing conditions for temporary workers. Future research should focus on the impact of specific policies on labor contractors, evaluate the long-term effects of regulatory changes, and explore solutions to the challenges faced by migrant laborers and agricultural producers.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview and Organization

This research sought to contribute to our understanding of the agricultural labor crisis in the Southeast region of the United States, with special attention given to the use and functionality of migrant labor. The first chapter of this thesis provides a brief overview and context for the study. The need for migrant labor among Southeast U.S. agricultural producers is highlighted by discussing Southeastern agriculture and general labor, and the central research questions are then introduced. Chapter Two discusses the results of narrative oral histories conducted with farmers in the Southeast regarding their experiences navigating labor needs. Crisis Management and Developmental Systems frameworks are also introduced in this chapter. Chapter Three includes the results of a phenomenological study conducted through interviews to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by migrant labor contractors. Chapter Four includes an overall discussion of the thesis, the results and conclusions across both studies, and recommendations for research and practice.

Overview of Agriculture Labor in the Southeast

This research was conducted to contribute to addressing issues pertaining to workforce availability in U.S. agriculture by examining regional migrant labor needs and challenges specifically within the Southeastern U.S. This region is generally composed of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. The Southeast region of the United States has a rich culture and history of farming. Overall, the agriculture sector in the Southeast contributes nearly \$47 billion to the nation's agricultural output each year, making it one of the largest contributing regions within the industry (AgAmerica, 2021). This region is home to roughly 400,000 farms

and 300,000 full-farm operators, which places the Southeast second only to the Midwest in number of farms and full owners. The Southeast farming community also boasts substantial commodity output and diversity of products, including peanuts, corn, hay, tobacco, soybeans, sorghum, cotton, citrus, melons, blueberries, strawberries, greenhouse nursery plants, tomatoes, peppers, squash, beef, pork, broilers, eggs, and dairy products (Reiter, 2020). Across commodities, the Southeast accounts for 15.2% of total U.S. animal and animal product cash receipts and 10.6% of the total U.S. crop cash receipts. Additionally, the average farm size in the Southeast has been relatively small compared to farms in other regions historically (AgAmerica, 2021), with states like Florida, Georgia, and Alabama having a higher proportion of small-scale farms, with more than 60% of farms in these states being less than 50 acres in size. However, the region has experienced a shift in farm size in recent years. Research conducted by University of Georgia revealed the average farm size across the Southeast grew by eight percent between 2017 and 2022, which exceeded the national growth at five percent (Daniel, 2024).

The continuation of agricultural production in the Southeast is contingent upon adequate sources of labor to meet the demands of such a robust industry (Stephens et al., 2024). In fact, as of 2021, farm labor in the Southeast region accounted for nearly 20% of all farm labor in the United States (AgAmerica, 2021). With this high need for labor comes a primary concern of how to continue to meet the demand. This concern is exacerbated when considered alongside issues of lack of availability, dependability, and quality among domestic labor (Mercier, 2014; Sexsmith, 2019). Wages in other sectors like construction, hospitality, and manufacturing have been on the rise, making these industries more attractive to domestic workers, particularly those seeking stable, higher-paying jobs with less physical demand. In a labor market, where other sectors offer better pay and more favorable working conditions, fewer Americans are willing to

take on the seasonal, physically demanding farm work that has historically been the backbone of U.S. agriculture. This trend has left farmers with a shrinking pool of domestic labor, particularly during the peak harvest seasons when labor demand is at its highest (Mercier, 2014).

Migrant Labor Programs

Migrant labor programs play a crucial role in addressing farm labor needs in the Southeast. In Southeast agricultural operations, migrant labor has been largely used to meet the heavy labor demands associated with harvesting crops that require hand harvesting, such as fruits and vegetables, which are common in the Southeast (AgAmerica, 2021; Stephens et al., 2024). Migrant labor is also commonly used when transporting goods or machinery between operational sites and assisting with miscellaneous tasks that may arise during the day-to-day operation. Prior research indicates migrant labor programs help stabilize workforce availability during peak harvest seasons, which is essential for crop yield and quality (Schewe & White, 2017; Stephens et al., 2024) and are thus vital to maintaining the viability and financial success of farming operations (Williams 2018; Williams & Ecalante, 2019).

The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Visa Program, often referred to just as H-2A, is one example of migrant labor programs that exist in the United States. The H-2A visa program, founded under the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act was initially designed as a short-term solution to address specific labor shortages in agriculture by permitting U.S. farmers to hire foreign workers when there was a shortage of domestic workers. However, the program has evolved and expanded significantly over the past two decades (Castillo et al., 2022). In fact, from 2010 to 2020, the number of certified H-2A positions more than tripled, rising from about 75,000 to over 275,000 (Castillo et al., 2022). This rapid growth highlights the growing dependence on migrant labor to sustain agricultural production in the United States. To participate in the H-2A

program, farmers must navigate a complex maze of immigration laws, comply with stringent wage standards, provide housing and transportation for temporary workers, and meet a wide range of federal regulations. The H-2A program thus connects producers with a managed labor force through contractors, which provides a structured approach to hiring and overseeing migrant workers (Alves Pena, 2012; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2024).

Considering Migrant Labor Within a Crisis Management System

The issues pertaining to the agricultural labor shortage and use of migrant labor function within and stem from a complex system of environmental, political, and social factors. If we consider the topic of migrant labor as an approach to addressing the labor shortage crisis, system approaches such as the Developmental Systems Theory ([DST], Ford & Lerner, 1992) and Doerfert's Agriculture Crisis Management Framework (Irlbeck, 2023) provide valuable structures for examining the natural and human factors that impact agricultural systems in which migrant labor programs operate. Further, this framework helps us identify primary actors and other stakeholders who influence such systems, such as farmers, migrant workers, politicians, migrant labor contractors, and citizens. To understand migrant labor dynamics in the Southeast, it is necessary to consider the "big picture" view of factors that have and continue to impact labor use in the United States.

Social Criticisms of Migrant Labor Programs

Migrant labor programs like H-2A have remained under scrutiny since their inception. Criticism and concerns expressed by agencies, institutes, workers' rights group, and other advocates across the system shape how labor programs operate at the micro-level and should be considered when examining the experiences of those directly engaged in the day-to-day aspects of labor programs. A common area of concern expressed about the H-2A program is around

protections and conditions for migrant laborers, about which advocates argue migrant labor is treated as lesser than other labor types and not subject to the same standards (Chen, 2025; Guerra, 2004; Johnston, 2021). Other worker right concerns stem from having migrant labor programs designed in a way that requires workers to be entirely dependent on employers for wages, transportation, housing, and legal documentation, which can create a substantial power imbalance, dependence, and opportunity for unethical treatment (Chen, 2025). Migrant workers may also face significant health risks due to the hazardous nature of agricultural work and exclusion of migrant labor from national labor laws (Guerra, 2004). Studies by Arcury et al. (2013) and Keller et al. (2016) highlight the lack of workplace protections and health resources available to these workers, particularly dairy and field workers. Migrant workers are often excluded from key U.S. labor laws, leaving them vulnerable to occupational illnesses, injuries, and fatalities. These health disparities, coupled with the growing demand for low-cost labor in rural areas, point to systemic issues that need to be addressed to ensure the sustainability of agriculture (Arcury et al., 2013).

Migrant Labor Considerations at the Farm Level

At the operational farm level, farmers play a key role in shaping programs like H-2A, as such programs would fail to exist without farmer buy-in. Many farmers enroll in the H-2A program as a means of enhancing labor efficiency and productivity. However, high costs and stringent regulations associated with the H-2A program can offset the program's value. Williams (2018) evaluated the effectiveness of the H2-A program on the operations of Southeast farmers who have previously used the program and concluded the H2-A program could be a useful tool for assisting in the farm labor supply problem. Williams and Escalante (2019) expanded this work and sought to provide empirical support for the H2A workers' importance as replacement

for former undocumented farm workers. While Williams and Escalante (2019) confirmed the need for H2A replacement workers, the researchers noted significant obstacles to the program's viability related to high costs and timing of worker availability. Farmers often operate on tight profit margins and may find it difficult to meet the wage expectations and other costs associated with migrant labor programs (Alves Pena, 2012; Castillo et al., 2022; Martin & Rutledge, 2021).

Due to such obstacles, some farmers may choose to employ undocumented workers rather than working through legal channels. Sexsmith (2019) examined the role of undocumented immigrants among New York (NY) dairy operations to determine the process through which farmers came to the decision to hire undocumented immigrants and how these choices interact with ongoing economic and cultural change in agrarian society. Sexsmith (2019) found NY dairy farmers perceive undocumented workers as a most "reliable" workforce due to their deportability and separation from family. The use of undocumented workers who fear deportation further exacerbates the previously mentioned threat of a power imbalance (Chen, 2025) and contributes to the complex system in which migrant labor programs operate.

Policy Reform on Migrant Labor

Criticisms and concerns surrounding both worker and farmer well-being shape policy decisions that further influence the migrant labor system. Policy reform around migrant labor has focused primarily on migrant worker protections and rights, program logistical processes and regulations, and proposals aimed at addressing wage demand versus financial resources conflicts (Guerra, 2004; Johnston, 2021). Comprehensive immigration reform, which addresses both the labor needs of farmers and the rights of workers, is essential for creating a more equitable and sustainable agricultural system and has direct implications for parties directly involved in employing, contracting, or participating in migrant labor programs.

One notable initiative is the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021, which sought to alleviate the financial pressures on farmers by freezing the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) for H-2A workers. The AEWR is the minimum wage that employers must pay H-2A workers, and freezing it was expected to reduce costs for farmers, potentially saving them an estimated \$169 million annually. Martin and Rutledge (2021) examined U.S. and California H-2A job certification data to project how changes to the H-2A wage structure, such as AEWR, would likely affect future farm labor costs. Martin and Rutledge (2021) maintained that wage freeze policies would likely reduce labor costs for farmers and help expand the H-2A visa program.

However, program expansion and reduced costs of migrant labor would likely have implications for domestic workers' wages (Martin & Rutledge, 2021). This wage dynamic again underscores the complexity of challenges within the agricultural migrant labor system and the delicate balance policymakers must strike when designing immigration and labor policies that affect agricultural workers. Policy reforms must carefully consider the broader implications for both migrant and domestic workers, as well as the long-term sustainability of the agricultural industry (Castillo et al., 2022; Martin & Rutledge, 2021).

Purpose and Central Research Questions

This research was conducted to provide a picture of agricultural labor in Southeast agricultural operations, with particular emphasis on the use of migrant labor in addressing labor needs. The current thesis was organized into two research studies to actualize this purpose.

Research Article # 1: A Narrative Ethnography of Southeast U.S. Farmers' Experiences with Meeting Labor Needs

The purpose of this study was to present the stories of Southeast farmers who use migrant labor in their operations. The central research question that guided this study was: *What are the lived experiences of Florida farmers in navigating the agricultural labor crisis with migrant labor?*

Research Article # 2: The Work Behind the Workforce: A Phenomenology of Job and Career Challenges in H-2A Contract Work

The purpose of this research was to present how agricultural migrant labor challenges are experienced by migrant labor contractors. The central research question that guided this study was: *How do H-2A contractors in the Southeast experience agricultural migrant labor challenges in their work?*

Reflexivity Statement

The main researcher on this project grew up on their family farm and was exposed to the use of migrant labor within the agriculture industry at a young age. The researcher also spent many years working and interacting with migrant laborers before this study was conducted.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is found in the single source of data collection in study #2, which was interviews with contractors. As contractors are domestic migrant workers and travel from region to region, field observations were not possible in a time frame fitting with the study.

Significance

The environment surrounding migrant labor programs is complex, and future research is needed to better understand it. The H-2A program plays a critical role in filling labor gaps, but

its limitations and associated costs highlight the need for further policy reform to ensure a sustainable, fair, and efficient agricultural workforce. Addressing the previously described multifaceted challenges is crucial for ensuring that the H-2A program and other migrant labor initiatives can effectively support the agricultural sector in the Southeastern United States, thereby contributing to its long-term sustainability and growth. However, addressing these challenges is complicated, as it requires not only improving working conditions for immigrant laborers and financial feasibility for farmers, but also requires considering broader structural changes to the labor market.

While migrant labor programs are shaped substantially by a variety of factors across the system and conversations held at the macro level, little research has been conducted to tell the stories of those who engage migrant labor challenges daily and *how* they experience those challenges. Experiences of farmers who use migrant labor, as well as contractors who are responsible for acquiring and managing such labor forces, could provide a fuller picture of the migrant labor experience within the larger system. As such, this study was conducted to capture those experiences. The findings from this study can be most useful when helping policymakers determine new forms of policy surrounding migrant labor that could be most beneficial to producers, contractors, and potentially migrant laborers. When taking a better look at migrant labor from multiple perspectives, policy that best represents and benefits all parties involved can be created. With a growing population, our global food system must be strengthened in the most sustainable ways possible to better serve consumers as well as producers. This research will highlight some of these possible ways and will also help in guiding the way for future generations.

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CHAPTER 2

A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF SOUTHEAST U.S. FARMERS' EXPERIENCES IN MEETING LABOR NEEDS

Abstract

This study examines the reliance on migrant labor in agriculture in the Southeastern United States. The central research question investigates the experiences of farmers in the Southeast who depend on migrant labor to address seasonal labor shortages and how various factors, including economic, political, and regulatory challenges, impact their operations. Semi-structured interviews with producers and field observations at their operations were carried out across three Southeast operations. Using narrative oral history and ethnographic practices, this study reveals migrant labor is crucial for maintaining farm productivity, particularly during peak harvest periods. However, farmers face significant challenges, including rising labor costs, bureaucratic inefficiencies in the H-2A visa process, and political uncertainties surrounding immigration reform. The study highlights that, while migrant labor remains essential, the increasing costs and regulatory burdens pose financial strain, especially for smaller farms. Recommendations include expanding and reforming the H-2A program to include year-round labor for industries like dairy farming, streamlining visa application processes, regulating labor costs, and exploring alternative labor models such as automation and local workforce development. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive immigration and labor policy reforms to ensure the sustainability and competitiveness of agricultural operations in the Southeast.

Introduction

Agricultural production in the Southeast United States is robust, accounting for nearly \$47 billion to the national agricultural production output each year (AgAmerica, 2021). This region is generally composed of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. This region comprises roughly 400,000 farms and is home to nearly 300,000 farmers who have full ownership of their operations. Production in the Southeast is also diverse and ranges from fruits and vegetables, to cover crops, to animals and animal products (Reiter, 2020). When looking at major Southeastern fruit commodities, such as berries and melons, these crops must be hand harvested due to their vulnerability which can become more at risk with the use of machinery. Once these crops are hand harvested, they are then taken to processing facilities where they are sanitized, sorted, and packaged before they are shipped to supermarkets across the country. In most cases, all three of these processes use migrant labor to help in making the system run more efficiently and accurately. While these steps are not identical for all fruit and vegetable crops harvested, the use of additional labor is similar (Huang et al., 2022). Due to its crop diversity and robust agricultural production, the Southeastern agricultural sector relies heavily upon farm labor.

Labor trends in agriculture in the Southeast reflect those across the other U.S. regions, where persistent labor shortages have been observed (Rutledge & Mérel, 2022). The scarcity of domestic labor in agriculture is driven by several key economic shifts, including the rising wages in non-agricultural sectors. Over time, wages in sectors like construction, hospitality, and manufacturing have been on the rise, making these industries more attractive to domestic workers, particularly those seeking stable, higher-paying jobs with fewer physical demands

(Mercier, 2014). In a labor market where other sectors offer better pay and more favorable working conditions, fewer Americans are willing to take on the seasonal, physically demanding farm work that has historically been the backbone of U.S. agriculture (Martin, 2002; Sexsmith, 2019).

These trends in domestic labor wages and interest have left farmers with a shrinking pool of domestic labor, particularly during the peak harvest seasons when labor demand is at its highest (Martin, 2002; Mercier, 2014). In a study conducted with members of the Florida Strawberry Growers Association, Biswas et al. (2018) found nearly 80% of growers had experienced significant labor shortages, especially during peak harvesting periods. Similar trends have been observed in research conducted with California producers. While California is not within the Southeastern region, similarities between the Southeast and California in crop diversity and labor-intensive fruit and vegetable harvesting can shed some light on shared labor patterns. Rutledge and Taylor (2019) found that California farmers experienced crop loss due to being unable to find enough farm workers for the labor that hand harvesting required. National surveys of nurseries, another labor-intensive industry sector, again reflected the pressing issue of labor shortages (McClellan, 2018).

Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Viewing the issue of labor shortages in the agriculture industry from a systems perspective can help us better understand farmers' experiences, the decisions they make when navigating the issue in their own operations, and how their experiences and decisions shape the larger system. Doerfert's Agriculture Crisis Management Framework (Irbleck, 2022) and the Developmental Systems Theory (DST, Ford & Learner, 1992) provide valuable structures for considering the natural and human factors that impact

farming systems. Further, these frameworks can help us identify and understand the influence of other actors and stakeholders on farmers' experiences. A systems perspective is ideal when examining farmers and migrant laborers because it allows us to understand both groups as distinct yet interdependent systems. Farmers and migrant laborers operate within their own separate subsystems, each with its own goals, roles, and structures. However, the interaction between these subsystems can be dynamic and complex. A systems framework acknowledges that while these groups maintain separate identities and functions, they are influenced by external factors such as economic policies, labor laws, environmental conditions, and market demands, which often shape their behavior and decision-making processes.

By viewing these groups through a systems lens, we can better understand how changes in one subsystem—such as shifts in agricultural practices, labor shortages, or changes in immigration policy—can ripple through and affect the other. For instance, a shift in crop demand might lead to changes in labor needs, thereby influencing the migration patterns of laborers. Conversely, migrant workers' labor practices and availability can affect the success of agricultural operations. This interconnectedness underscores the importance of considering both groups in tandem, while still respecting the individuality of their respective systems. Moreover, a systems approach can also reveal feedback loops, where the actions of one group can either strengthen or disrupt the stability of the other, providing a deeper understanding of their symbiotic yet separate existence. Ultimately, this perspective is ideal for identifying leverage points where interventions can improve both subsystems—whether through policy adjustments, better

labor conditions, or more sustainable farming practices—leading to more holistic and effective solutions.

Per Doerfert’s framework, natural and human factors impact both managed and unmanaged systems, and those systems then impact and are impacted by the environment, plants, and animals. Irlbeck (2023) maintained we must first consider the system we belong to, and how our actions have implications on other systems, before we can begin to develop a plan to address a crisis. In the context of this study, with agricultural labor shortage as the crisis, we must therefore first describe the system in which Southeast farmers belong and the factors that impact that system before we can make recommendations for how to best prepare for and respond to the labor shortage problem. This research study made an attempt to do this through a review of relevant research coupled with our in-depth narratives of Southeastern farmers’ experiences. While farmers may use a variety of methods to offset labor availability, and those will be included in the discussion, this inquiry is focused particularly on farmers’ experiences with migrant labor in their operations.

Farmers may seek a variety of solutions or methods to offset labor shortages, such as offering higher wages and offering benefits, adopting labor saving technologies, offering employee trainings to enhance the skills of their current labor force, shifting acreage away from labor-intensive crops, and increasing dependence on migrant labor (Rihn et al., 2022; Rutledge & Taylor, 2019). Historically, the U.S. agricultural sector has been heavily reliant on migrant labor to labor gaps, particularly regarding labor-intensive seasonal work, and employing nondomestic farm workers remains a common practice among agricultural operations (AgAmerica, 2021; Mercier, 2014; Stephens et al., 2024; Williams, 2018). The H-2A Temporary Agricultural Visa Program is one migrant labor program farmers may utilize to meet labor needs. The H-2A

program, initially designed as a short-term solution to address specific labor shortages, allows agricultural employers to bring in temporary guest workers from other countries to fill critical labor gaps (Castillo et al., 2022). Since the H-2A program began in 1952, it has expanded significantly. In 2020, the number of certified H-2A positions surged from approximately 75,000 in 2010 to over 275,000, with migrant laborers under the program making up roughly 10% of the total agricultural workforce in the U.S.

However, the H-2A program is not without its challenges, and a myriad of factors may influence if and how farmers use migrant labor to meet labor demands. Describing these factors can help provide a deeper context through which the results of this study can be considered. First, public perceptions and scrutiny of programs like H-2A may influence farmers' engagement in labor programs. There has been long standing concern around migrant laborers being treated unfairly or made to work in unsafe work conditions by their employers (Chen, 2025; Guerra, 2004; Johnston, 2021; Keller et al., 2016). There is currently a significant gap in research to understand farmers' perceptions and how it might shape their experiences.

Second, the political environment can impact farmers' experiences with migrant labor. Comprehensive immigration reform that addresses both the rights of laborers and the needs of producers is essential for creating a more equitable and sustainable agricultural system. However, given the complexity of the agricultural and migrant labor system, identifying the best policy is challenging. For example, the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021 sought to alleviate financial burdens on farmers by freezing the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) for H-2A workers. The AEWR is the minimum wage that employers must pay H-2A workers, and freezing it was expected to reduce costs for farmers. While it was anticipated that wage freeze policies would reduce labor costs for farmers and expand the H-2A program, there was also a

concern about the negative implications program expansion might have for the domestic workforce (Martin & Rutledge, 2021). Policies not directed toward agriculture labor, but related to immigration in general, can also further complicate the migrant worker dynamic and farmers' engagement with programs like H-2A. Kostandini et al. (2014) examined the effects of local immigration enforcement efforts on U.S. agriculture at the county-level by using variations in the timing of county adoption of 287(g) programs, which permitted local police to enforce immigration law. The results indicated county enforcement efforts reduced immigrant presence in adopting jurisdictions. Immigration culture, therefore, can pose a significant challenge to those who engage with migrant labor programs as heightened scrutiny and policy reform can create an atmosphere of uncertainty for both the laborers and the farmers who employ them (Kostandini et al., 2014). Research is needed to better understand the challenges farmers have faced with using migrant labor programs in the current political climate.

Lastly, farmer efficacy and capacity have to be considered when describing the system in which migrant labor programs operate. While programs like H-2A are a crucial source of labor for farmers, they also come with high costs and burdensome regulations. To participate in the H-2A program, farmers must comply with a series of strict regulations, including ensuring adequate housing and transportation for workers, meeting wage standards, and covering various operational expenses. For small farmers, who may have limited financial resources or operational capacity, these requirements can be prohibitively expensive, often making it difficult for them to access the labor they need (Castillo et al., 2022; Martin & Rutledge, 2021; Vaughan et al., 2019). In contrast, larger agribusinesses with their greater financial and operational resources are better able to navigate the complexities of the H-2A program. These larger operations can absorb the high costs associated with the program and more easily manage the regulatory demands, putting

small farmers at a competitive disadvantage (Vaughn et al., 2019). As a result, one could argue the agricultural industry is becoming increasingly tilted in favor of large-scale, capital-intensive farming operations, while smaller farmers struggle to remain competitive. While migrant labor has become increasingly necessary to support the viability of both large and small farms, it has also deepened the economic divide between them (Williams, 2018).

In summary, the evolving landscape of agricultural labor in the U.S. reflects a complex interplay of economic pressures, immigration policies, health concerns, and changing labor practices. The H-2A program plays a critical role in filling labor gaps, but its limitations and associated costs highlight the need for further policy reform to ensure a sustainable, fair, and efficient agricultural workforce. Addressing these challenges requires not only improving working conditions for immigrant laborers but also considering broader structural changes to the labor market, including increasing domestic labor participation and investing in labor-saving technologies. Efforts are needed to ensure farmers' voices are included in discussions around how to address the agricultural labor crisis. The current study attempts to capture those voices by sharing the stories of farmers in the Southeast who use or have used migrant labor.

Purpose and Central Research Question

This research was conducted to better understand the use of migrant labor in the Southeastern United States by sharing farmers' stories about how they have navigated labor shortages. Understanding farmers' unique needs, experiences, and associated challenges can help inform further development of labor programs and evaluate potential growth in the use of migrant labor programs among different commodity sectors. The following central research question guided this study: *What are the lived experiences of Florida farmers in navigating the agricultural labor crisis with migrant labor?*

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research design that blended narrative oral history and ethnographic practices to tell the stories of Southeast farmers. Oral history and ethnography overlap in their methodological and theoretical approaches and can be brought together through their shared value for stories and observations (Munz, 2021). Narrative research aims to collect stories from individuals about their lived and told experiences, and narrative oral histories involve gathering personal reflections of events and their causes and effects from one or several individuals (Creswell, 2013). Ethnographic research is a qualitative approach aimed at understanding the cultural practices, behaviors, and social interactions of a particular group. Ethnographies typically include larger groups, however, and aim to create a detailed description of shared patterns across a shared-culture group (Kramer & Adams, 2017; Creswell, 2013). Both narrative oral history and ethnography encourage the use of multiple sources of data and emphasize the use of field observations (Creswell, 2013). Narrative oral histories go a step further and encourage strong collaboration between the researcher and subjects so that stories can be co-constructed as the story emerges through the interaction or dialogue between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2013). This study sought to highlight the shared culture in Southeast agriculture without losing the deep, personal histories and experiences of individual farmers as they navigated labor needs. This approach allows for a deep, nuanced understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the participants themselves.

Participant Selection

To identify a participant pool for this research, the researcher first set out to categorize farms in the Southeast in terms of both size and production category. After thorough research using the United States Department of Agriculture database, three general production categories

were identified in which Southeastern operations fell: (a) animal and/or animal products producers, (b) fruit and/or vegetable producers, and (c) forage/fiber/and filler producers (Reiter, 2020). Once we established production categories, farms were further sorted within each category by size. Fruit and/or vegetable farms and forage/fiber/filler farms were sized according to a USDA (2023) report, in which the average farm size was determined to be between 400-500 acres. Farms greater than 500 acres were categorized as large, and those less than 400 acres were categorized as small. Animal and/or animal product operations were sized based on herd size rather than acreage, and we considered the average animal operation size as falling between 100-500 head depending on specific type of livestock (Adkins & Riley, 2012; USDA, 2023). Large animal operations were those with more than 500 head, and small operations were those with less than 100.

Using the previously described production categories as a guide, potential participants were contacted using previous industry connections and inquired about their interest in participating in our study. The lead researcher used her family's industry connections, as well as snowball sampling through word of mouth once further participants were needed and recommendations from identified participants, to facilitate recruitment. Eligibility criteria for participation included: (1) current owner or manager of an agricultural operation within the Southeastern region of the United States, (2) fall within one of the previously determined categories, and (3) willingness to participate in a 30-60 minute semi-structured interview and a farm visit. Experience with using migrant labor on their operation was not a requirement as this research initially set out to understand farmers' experience in navigating labor challenges, regardless of whether that included migrant labor. Through recruitment efforts, nine farmers were identified, each representing one of the previously determined categories.

Data Collection

Once the nine producers were confirmed, interview times were set up to best suit their availability and all took place during a two-week period during the month of September 2024. Data were collected through phone-based interviews, which were chosen for their flexibility and ability to provide in-depth responses. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted by a trained researcher (the lead author), who followed a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing space for participants to share their experiences on their terms. The interview guide consisted of broad, open-ended questions to encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences and the meaning they attached to them (see Appendix for interview protocol). The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses. Transcriptions were then anonymized to ensure confidentiality. As for field visits and observations, these were conducted over the span of about three months from October-December of 2024, times varied based on farmer availability. These field visits consisted of riding around with the manager of the operation to a variety of locations to witness different aspects of the day-to-day operation. All visits were conducted from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.

Data Analysis

The decision was made to highlight only three of the nine farmers in our data analysis. The three selected were each in the large operation, which provides some ability in comparing experiences across commodity types without the influence of farm size. All three farmers included in our analysis were primarily based in the state of Florida, which poses a limitation to our study in terms of representing the Southeast region. However, most commodities produced

across the other Southeastern states are also produced in Florida. Additionally, the state of Florida is the largest user of migrant agricultural labor in the Southeast (AgAmerica, 2023).

Coding

Through inductive analysis and aligned with the tenets of oral history and ethnography, the farmers' stories were intertwined and revealed insight into farmers' use and struggles with meeting labor needs through migrant labor. Elements of Kramer & Adams (2017) ethnographic approach for an organic route were used for data synthesis. First, coding was used to identify important ideas within the data. This step involved dividing the data into smaller sections that represented various ideas. A constant comparison method was then employed, systematically categorizing similar units and grouping them accordingly. Categories were developed by comparing units and determining whether they belonged together or not. The goal was not to count occurrences of themes but to create distinct categories that reflected the culture of the group. Over time, these categories were refined and examined how they related to one another, ultimately creating a comprehensive understanding of the group's culture. Each category was then presented within each individual narrative in the results (Munz, 2021)

Capturing the Ethnographies

When it came to representing the groups, Van Maanen (2011) outlined three types of ethnographies: realist, confessional, and impressionistic tales. Realist tales present objective and distanced accounts of the groups, typically using third-person voice and excluding personal experiences. Confessional tales, on the other hand, emphasize the ethnographers' personal involvement and transformation throughout the studies, using a first-person voice. Impressionistic tales, which combine elements of both, were used in this research to offer

personal and evocative accounts of our presence in the groups while maintaining focus on the groups' cultures.

Verification

Verification of the analyses was crucial to ensure the findings were credible and reliable (Kramer & Adams, 2017). The researcher engaged in prolonged field engagements, explaining why the time spent with the groups had been sufficient for the studies. The researcher also used thick description, which involved providing rich details through quotes and field notes to support our conclusions, making it easier for readers to assess the validity of our interpretations (Creswell, 2013).

Member Checking

Member checking was employed, where the researcher shared the studies with group members to confirm their accuracy. While member checking added credibility, it also carried the risk that some group members might have disagreed with our portrayals.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (UTK IRB-24-08367-XM). All participants provided informed consent and were assured of their responses' confidentiality and anonymity. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study without consequence. Data were stored securely, and all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts. The researcher used fake names for each farm operation that was described, as well as using pseudonyms for the producers that were interviewed.

Results

Frank, Operations Manager of Connection Dairies

I visited Connection Dairies in Levy and Gilchrist counties in Florida, where I had the privilege of interviewing Frank, the operations manager. Frank offered an insightful look into the daily operations, labor dynamics, and sustainability efforts of one of the largest freestyle dairies in Florida. My visit and interview with Frank provided a nuanced perspective on the challenges and innovations of modern dairy farming, especially in regard to migrant labor, sustainability practices, and workforce management.

A Large-Scale Operation

Connection Dairies is a major player in Florida's dairy industry, and the scale of operations is immediately apparent when you pull up to the property. Frank first introduced me to the farm's extensive layout. Connection is the largest freestyle dairy in the state. Their permit allows for 8,400 milk cows and another 2,000 or so dry cows. They farm over 6,000 acres, with over 2,100 acres dedicated to spray fields.

The sheer scale of the farm is impressive, and the logistics behind maintaining such a large dairy operation are staggering. The farm operates 24/7, 365 days a year, ensuring that the cows are milked, fed, and cared for continuously. "Every day we've got to milk the cows, feed the cows, and care for them," Frank explained when attempting to outline the round-the-clock nature of their work.

Connection Dairies practices triple cropping, which means they grow the vast majority of the feed needed for the cows, particularly the forages. "We do buy commodities like ground corn and soybean meal, some byproducts for their diets, but it is a heavily forage-based diet," Frank explained. This self-sufficiency in feed production is crucial for the farm's sustainability.

Another innovation that sets Connection apart is its commitment to renewable energy. The farm was one of the first in the Southeast to build an aerobic manure digester, which converts methane gas into electricity. "We did that for 10 years," Frank shared, noting the significant energy savings. "Last year, we converted that methane gas through a gas plant that cleans and compresses the gas and injects it into the FGT pipeline, creating renewable natural gas." Connection Dairies is also highly focused on water conservation. The farm recycles water in both the parlors and barns, making significant efforts to reduce water usage throughout the operation. "We try to be on the cutting edge, not the bleeding edge," Frank added, referring to their cautious but progressive approach to technology.

A Reliance on Migrant Labor

The next part of the interview turned to the workforce that keeps the farm running smoothly. "We have about 140 to 150 year-round employees," Frank explained. "We need people designated for the animals, the herd. We've got herd health, parlor, row crops, our shop, farm maintenance—there's a lot of specialized work."

The farm's workforce includes a mix of local and migrant labor, with a significant portion coming through various visa programs. "We utilize multiple visa programs," Frank said, as he detailed the types of labor used on the farm. "We use TN visas, which are professional visas, and the majority of those workers are in our herd health departments. These are folks who treat sick cows, work in reproduction, and help with maternity care." Additionally, Connection Dairies uses H-2A labor for their cropping operations. "We bring in H-2A labor from South Africa," Frank explained. "These workers come for nine to ten months and are here to help with the crops—harvesting, packing, covering bulk, and tractor work. They don't touch the animals; it's all about the cropping side."

It became clear that migrant labor is essential for the farm's operations, and Frank candidly discussed the reasons behind this reliance. "We struggle to find locals who will do the jobs as we need them done," he said. "It's tough to find local workers who will show up and be job-free. That's why we use migrant labor—we don't have many alternatives... We haven't been able to find local labor to do a lot of these jobs, so it's just having an option for labor that some folks aren't going to do," Frank said. Migrant workers are often willing to take on physically demanding tasks that locals are not.

However, relying on migrant labor is not without its difficulties. "If Covid hits and they can't get cleared to come here, or if there are issues at the embassy or consulate, it can be stressful," the manager shared, reflecting on the uncertainty of working with migrant labor. "We've had some TN visa workers who have been with us for years get denied. It's out of our hands—you're always holding your breath to make sure your guys come back."

The unpredictability of the visa process has been particularly challenging in recent years. "Once they get here, it's great," Frank continued, "but it's stressful not knowing if they'll be able to return. You never know if they're going to get denied for one reason or another. The uncertainty is the hardest part."

We took a short break during the interview to walk through the office area and once inside the file room, you could see mountains of paperwork everywhere. Frank went on to tell me that the reason for the mess was that the labor board had been by recently to check documents on a few of the workers and ended up going through all the labor paperwork he had available to them.

The Rising Costs and Legislative Concerns

Another significant issue the manager raised is the increasing cost of using H-2A labor. "They increased the H-2A worker rate by 20 percent last year," Frank said, visibly frustrated. "That put the price pretty high. When we already have an adequate supply, I don't understand why they'd raise the rates. We're already paying for transportation, so why the increase?" This price hike has made labor costs more difficult to manage. "We're still using H-2A labor because we don't have an alternative," he continued. "But it's become expensive. Now, when you get a newbie who doesn't have much of a skill set, you're paying more than you'd like for training them."

One legislative reform Frank believes could alleviate some of the labor challenges is expanding the H-2A program to include dairy workers. Currently, dairy employees are excluded from the H-2A program because dairy farming is not considered seasonal. "Today, dairy workers are excluded from the H-2A program because we're not seasonal," he explained. "We can't go to H-2A to get people to milk our cows. That could be a huge help if they changed that."

Navigating the Future

My time at Connection Dairies illuminated the complex realities of running a large-scale dairy operation. From cutting-edge sustainability practices to the significant reliance on migrant labor, the farm is a model of modern agriculture, but it is not without its struggles. Frank's insights into the rising costs of labor and the challenges of navigating an uncertain immigration system highlight the significant hurdles that dairy producers face. As the industry moves forward, it is clear that labor reform and continued innovation will be key to maintaining sustainability and efficiency in the agricultural sector.

Mike, Owner and Manager of Extravagant Melons

On my visit to Extravagant Melon Company, I had the opportunity to sit down with the owner and operations manager of this watermelon production company that spans multiple states along the Southeastern United States. This operation, which has been in business since 1995, provided a detailed look at the seasonal nature of farming, the role of migrant labor, and the logistics behind large-scale produce production and distribution. During the interview, the producer, Mike, offered valuable insights into the daily workings of the farm, the challenges of labor, and his perspectives on the future of the industry. His entry into the watermelon business began in his college years, and he shared the journey that led him to start his own operation. Mike started in the watermelon business in 1995 when he was in college. In 1997, Mike graduated college and went to work for his uncle in the watermelon business for nine years. In 2004, he started his company and has been in this business ever since."

This interview and field visit was one that added great relevance to the study because of the unique operation set up. While my interview was conducted with Mike, I was able to visit multiple farms that he manages and he was able to drive his points home and gave me deep insight as to how critical migrant labor is to fruit and vegetable production. The farm's primary focus is the production and distribution of watermelons. Mike explained the seasonal cycle of the operation, which begins long before the watermelons are harvested in the United States. "Primarily, we are in the business of growing, packing, and shipping watermelons," he said as we began the conversation. "In January, we start out shipping offshore, which mainly entails produce coming from Mexico and Guatemala. Then, at the beginning of March, we begin planting watermelons in the U.S. Southeastern states," said Mike. The farm's operations stretch across several states, starting in south Florida and gradually moving up the U.S. east coast,

eventually reaching Michigan where the company is based. "The majority of these farmers are ones that I've built up relationships with over the years," Mike continued, reflecting on his long-standing connections with the farmers who help cultivate the watermelons. You could see these connections every time we stepped out of the truck. Every visit started with a conversation about family, before the hard topic of business began to take hold.

A Workforce Mixed of Full-Time, Seasonal, and Migrant Labor

As the discussion turned to his workforce, Mike explained that the business relies on a mix of full-time and seasonal employees, as well as a significant number of migrant laborers brought in through the H-2A visa program. "We have seven full-time employees and twelve additional employees that come on as seasonal help," he noted. "Seasonal help is employed during the months of June, July, and August. Their tasks mainly include monitoring the warehouse, keeping track of what's going on in the field, and managing orders for products as they come in."

However, the bulk of the labor force during peak season consists of migrant workers, who are crucial to the success of the farm's operations. "We employ around 75 migrant laborers through the H-2A program each year," Mike explained. "These employees work in a variety of different roles and tasks. The main responsibilities include hand harvesting the watermelons that are ready to ship from the field, transporting this produce back to the packing house, sorting and labeling the products, and loading the finished product onto semi-trucks to fulfill orders made by U.S. and Canadian supermarkets."

The migrant workers, who are sourced through labor contractors, are carefully managed and trained throughout the season. "These workers are supplied to us through labor contractors who are responsible for the transporting, training, and care of these workers while they are here,"

the producer continued," said Mike. These contractors are on site with the workers during the season, from the beginning of April all the way until the end of October, to assist in the management of these crews." This system of labor moving from farm to farm was even more interesting when looking around. While conducting these field visits over the span of a couple of days, I was able to see how some workers would move even on a daily basis to cover a labor gap even if it was for a different producer.

Why Use Migrant Labor?

Mike was candid about the challenges of sourcing domestic labor and the necessity of relying on migrant labor. "We have to use migrant labor because domestic laborers aren't interested in this type of work and usually don't last long," he explained. The physical and demanding nature of the work in the fields, combined with the seasonal cycle, makes it difficult to attract and retain local workers. Mike was able to show me some of his online recruitment tools and explained how even after working with farm labor recruitment offices, he still was not able to receive any interest from domestic laborers.

Despite these challenges, Mike also spoke to the high quality of work provided by the migrant laborers. "Migrant laborers also do a great job, and you can tell by the quality of their work that they enjoy what they do," he said. The consistency and reliability of the labor force are one of the key reasons for the farm's continued success. Mike definitely showed pride in his workforce during these visits. Every time we passed by an employee, he always greeted them with a smile and a short conversation to take care of any needs or concerns.

Cost and Bureaucratic Obstacles

The farm's reliance on migrant labor has continuously proven to be effective in regards to work quality. "We haven't really experienced any downfalls or challenges with using migrant

labor," Mike shared when talking about the quality of the employees themselves. "If anything, I would say that the major problem we face is the cost of being able to use this labor."

The high costs associated with employing migrant labor can strain the operation's finances, especially given the seasonal nature of the business. "Unfortunately, we haven't discovered a universal way of overcoming this challenge," Mike continued. "Mainly, it comes down to the year-to-year task of making sure that we can get top dollar for our products to offset the cost of using migrant laborers." Mike showed me a short breakdown of his cost increases and I was amazed to see how much more expensive things could become in just a year.

There have been instances when the farm had to reduce the number of laborers hired due to rising costs, which resulted in an increased workload for the remaining crew. "In the past, there have been years when we've had to decrease the number of laborers that we hired, but this ended up making our season more strenuous," Mike explained.

Looking forward, Mike expressed concern about the future availability of migrant labor and the bureaucratic obstacles that can hinder timely labor entry. "Being able to get enough [labor] is the problem," he said. "That depends on the administration in the White House and what type of programs they do or don't offer. Every year is a continued challenge." He noted that issues at the border, as well as the inefficiencies of paperwork handling by contractors, often result in delays in getting workers to the farm. "I know one contractor that had over 450 guys who still haven't made it to harvest watermelons that were supposed to be here in June—May, actually." Keep in mind that this interview was conducted in September.

The Need for Legislative Change

One of the main obstacles the farm faces is the complexity of the H-2A program itself, which can create delays and uncertainty each season. Mike advocates for legislative changes to

make the process easier for employers. "I think it needs to have some modifications done to make it easier for these guys to get here," he said. "They definitely get paid well, and they'll continue to get paid well, but it's the bureaucracy trying to get the program and getting enough people that has always been a challenge." A streamlined and more predictable process for hiring migrant laborers, according to Mike, would provide much-needed stability for operations like his, which depend on a reliable workforce to meet the demands of seasonal production.

A Continuing Challenge

Mike's insights into the complexities of labor in agriculture revealed the interconnections between farm operations, seasonal work, and migrant labor. The challenges associated with securing a reliable and sufficient workforce are exacerbated by the bureaucratic hurdles of the H-2A program and the fluctuating political landscape. Despite these obstacles, the operation continues to thrive, with migrant workers playing a vital role in the harvest, production, and distribution of watermelons.

As Mike reflected, the future of agriculture will likely hinge on the ability to secure labor in a competitive and efficient way. "Every year is a challenge," he said, underscoring the unpredictability that farm operations face in a rapidly changing environment. The need for a consistent and reliable workforce is clear, and the hope is that future legislative adjustments will help ease some of the burdens on farm producers.

Jorge, Owner and Operator of Gonzales Farm Service

I had the opportunity to sit down with Jorge, the owner and operator of a multifaceted agricultural business, Gonzales Farm Service, which is a farm situated in a rural agricultural hub. The farm has been in operation since the mid-1980s, with the current owner taking over the main operations in the early 2000s. Specializing in a diverse range of crops including peanuts, corn,

green beans, carrots, broccoli, and onions, the farm's output spans nearly the entire calendar year. Our discussion focused on the labor force that sustains the operation, particularly the critical role of migrant workers, and the challenges and benefits associated with using migrant labor in agriculture.

A Year-Round Agricultural Enterprise

The farm's business model revolves around the cultivation of a variety of crops, each harvested at different times of the year. "We harvest something 11 out of 12 months out of every year," the producer, Jorge explained, emphasizing the constant cycle of planting, cultivating, and harvesting that defines the operation. Crops such as peanuts, corn, and green beans are the backbone of the farm, while specialty crops like carrots, broccoli, and onions provide added diversity. The sheer scale of this production makes it clear that maintaining a reliable workforce is crucial to keeping operations running smoothly year-round.

The operation's longevity and success are a result of decades of agricultural knowledge and hands-on experience. Jorge noted that the farm was started in the mid-1980s, but it was in the early 2000s when they took over the core responsibilities of managing the farm. This transition was a pivotal moment, as it allowed the farm to expand and streamline operations. When moving from area to area throughout my field visit, I was able to witness multiple harvesting practices going on at once at an efficiency I had never imagined possible.

A Workforce of Full-Time and Migrant Labor

When it comes to the workforce, the farm employs a mixture of full-time, local workers and a significant number of migrant laborers who are brought in through the H-2A visa program. "We see about 50, approximately 50 here at all times," Jorge shared, referring to the permanent employees who help maintain day-to-day operations. "You have to have a good work ethic and

have some background in agriculture" to qualify for a full-time position, he noted, highlighting the need for experienced individuals who can manage the various agricultural tasks required on the farm.

However, the core of the labor force, especially during peak seasons, is composed of migrant workers who arrive through the H-2A program. "Yes, a lot," Jorge said when asked about migrant labor. "We use the H-2A program, which we have a licensed H-2A contractor that we hired, and he brings them over. We have almost year-round, so it didn't vary to the beginning, as low as, you know, as well as 0 and up to 200." This dependence on migrant labor is critical for the farm's ability to meet its seasonal demands, especially for tasks like harvesting and processing. Without these workers, the farm would be unable to keep up with the volume and pace of production. With just the speed alone being nothing short of incredible, it was easy to see how impactful migrant labor was to the production success.

The Necessity of Migrant Labor in Meeting Labor Shortages

Jorge was forthright about the challenges of hiring domestic labor. "We can't get enough, we can't get enough domestic labor here to do the job, no way," he said, underscoring the shortage of local workers willing or able to fill the roles needed on the farm. The physically demanding and seasonal nature of agricultural labor makes it particularly difficult to attract a stable, long-term workforce from the local population.

Given this shortage, migrant labor has become an essential component of the farm's success. The producer praised the consistency and reliability of migrant workers, noting that they do not bring the same complications that can sometimes arise with local labor. "Oh yeah. They're here every time. We don't have problems. They don't do all the drama. They're here to work," he remarked with satisfaction, reflecting on the work ethic and focus of the migrant workers who

are brought in each season. Jorge even took the time to show me two processing lines, one managed by domestic labor and one by migrant labor, the migrant labor line was moving much faster and the migrant workers were performing much more diligently throughout the process.

Bureaucratic Hurdles

Jorge elaborated on significant challenges tied to the process. One of the primary hurdles is the extensive paperwork required to manage the H-2A program. "It can be. There's a lot of paperwork involved. It all has to be done correctly. That's the challenge," Jorge explained. The complexity and volume of paperwork can be overwhelming, and any errors or delays in submitting the necessary documentation could lead to disruptions in the labor force. To address this, the farm has designated a specific employee whose sole responsibility is to ensure that all paperwork is in order. "We have assigned a lady that is her job to be sure that all of the instrument paperwork is permitted," Jorge shared, highlighting the importance of a dedicated person managing the process to avoid costly mistakes or delays.

Concerns for the Future of Migrant Labor

As the conversation shifted to the future, Jorge expressed concern about potential changes to the migrant labor programs that could affect the farm's ability to secure the workers it needs. "I don't see a problem other than maybe the government changing the programs and the farmers," he said, noting the unpredictable nature of policy changes that could affect the availability of migrant workers. "If it's not changing fast enough, I think without this migrant labor, our country will go hungry," he added, stressing the critical role migrant labor plays not just on his farm, but across the agricultural industry in the United States.

The uncertainty surrounding immigration policy and the future of migrant labor programs looms large, and Jorge expressed a desire for legislative action that could provide more stability

for agricultural businesses. "There needs to be some legitimate work done legislatively to help set wages that are more beneficial," he said, advocating for wage standards that would better reflect the realities of the agricultural sector. "There was supposedly a study conducted using farmers to help set wages that were fair to farmers for migrant labor, but I've talked to several hundred producers about it and no one can confirm that this actually happened."

A Vital but Fragile Workforce

Through this interview, it became clear that the farm's success relies heavily on the labor provided by migrant workers. These workers are an integral part of the operation, enabling the farm to meet the demands of a year-round harvest cycle. While the benefits of using migrant labor are evident—particularly in terms of reliability and work ethic—there are also significant challenges associated with managing the bureaucratic complexities of the H-2A program.

Looking to the future, Jorge remains cautiously optimistic but deeply concerned about the potential disruptions to the migrant labor system. He recognizes that without these workers, agricultural production in the U.S. would face severe difficulties. As the conversation concluded, it was evident that the relationship between farmers and migrant labor is a delicate balance—one that will require thoughtful legislative support and practical solutions to ensure that the agricultural industry continues to thrive in the years to come.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The interviews conducted with agricultural producers—from dairy farms to fruit and vegetable operations—reveal a critical issue facing modern agriculture: the reliance on migrant labor. Across various sectors, from Connection Dairies to Extravagant Melon Company and Gonzales Farm Service, the need for a stable and reliable labor force is undeniable. These operations depend heavily on migrant workers to meet the seasonal and year-round demands of

their industries, underscoring the indispensable role that migrant workers play in U.S. agriculture.

At the core of these agricultural operations is the use of migrant workers, who enter the U.S. through visa programs such as the H-2A and TN programs. These workers perform a wide array of tasks, from caring for livestock and harvesting crops to packing and distributing produce. Agricultural operations—whether in large-scale dairy farming or melon production—require a workforce that is not only capable of handling physically demanding tasks but also adaptable to the seasonal fluctuations of farming cycles. Unfortunately, the domestic workforce is often unwilling to take on these roles due to the high physical demands and seasonal instability of farm work. This is compounded by the fact that, as Rihn et al. (2022) and Rutledge and Taylor (2019) observed, local workers are frequently unavailable or uninterested in seasonal agricultural employment, pushing farmers to rely more on migrant labor.

This reliance on migrant labor is crucial to farm productivity, allowing agricultural operations to meet production targets and maintain operational efficiency. Without migrant labor, many farms would struggle to operate at scale or fulfill market demands, especially during peak production periods. These workers are vital for tasks such as harvesting, sorting, packing, and transporting crops. However, while migrant labor is essential, it also presents challenges—chief among them rising labor costs and bureaucratic hurdles in securing and renewing work visas.

Despite the essential role of migrant labor, there are significant challenges, particularly regarding the H-2A visa process. Both the melon producer and the dairy farm manager raised concerns about the bureaucratic complexities surrounding the visa process, including delays in visa approvals, processing inefficiencies, and potential denials of visa renewals. These delays

can disrupt farm operations, particularly when workers cannot arrive in time for critical seasonal work. As Irlbeck (2023) noted, understanding the broader systems at play is key to addressing such challenges. For example, Gonzales Farm Service faces logistical issues due to the uncertainty of visa approval, resulting in operational disruptions that affect the smooth running of the farm.

Furthermore, the increasing costs associated with hiring migrant workers, especially in the context of rising rates for H-2A labor, are straining farm finances. The melon producer noted that labor cost increases, combined with the seasonal nature of farm work, place significant pressure on budgets, forcing difficult decisions about labor force size and compensation. These cost challenges are further complicated by the volatile nature of the agricultural market and tight profit margins, as also observed by Mercier (2014) and Williams (2018).

Additionally, producers continue to face difficulties in recruiting a reliable and motivated local workforce. The high physical demands of agricultural labor, combined with the lack of long-term job security and the seasonal nature of farm work, make it difficult to attract domestic workers. This challenge highlights the necessity of a stable and predictable labor source, further reinforcing the reliance on migrant labor, as described by Castillo et al. (2022) and Rutledge & Taylor (2019).

Looking toward the future, several concerns could affect the ongoing reliance on migrant labor in agriculture. Both dairy and melon producers expressed concerns about potential changes in immigration policy, particularly regarding the accessibility and stability of the H-2A program. There is growing fear that legislative changes may limit farm access to the labor force they need, particularly if the system becomes more restrictive or if future administrations reduce the availability of work visas.

One potential solution is to reform and expand the H-2A visa program. Currently, dairy workers are excluded from the H-2A program, as dairy farming is not considered seasonal. This exclusion poses a significant challenge for large-scale dairy operations like Connection Dairies, which rely on year-round labor to maintain operations. Expanding the H-2A program to include those roles related to animal treatment and care such as dairy workers would ensure that farmers can access the labor they need to operate smoothly. Additionally, streamlining the application and renewal process for H-2A visas would reduce delays and inefficiencies, helping farm operations better manage their workforce. Another legislative solution could address the rising cost of migrant labor. As the melon producer noted, increasing H-2A worker rates have placed immense financial pressure on farms. Legislative efforts to regulate and standardize labor costs could help prevent sudden increases in labor prices, which disproportionately affect smaller farms or seasonal operations. Additionally, creating wage standards that reflect the realities of agricultural work—while ensuring fair compensation for workers—would help stabilize costs for producers, as highlighted by Irlbeck (2023) and Martin & Rutledge (2021).

Finally, ensuring a more predictable and efficient labor pipeline would be crucial. The introduction of a more flexible and streamlined process for hiring migrant workers would alleviate some of the stress that producers face each year. Eliminating unnecessary delays, simplifying paperwork, and providing clearer guidance for farmers and labor contractors would provide greater stability to the agricultural sector.

Future Research Topics

To further understand and address the challenges related to migrant labor in U.S. agriculture, future research should focus on several key areas. First, research should examine the economic impact of the H-2A visa program on agricultural producers and migrant workers.

While it is clear that the program plays a vital role in maintaining the agricultural workforce, there are concerns about rising labor costs and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Castillo et al., 2022). Examining how changes in visa costs and processing times impact farm profitability and operational efficiency, particularly for smaller farms, could provide valuable insights.

Understanding the demographic composition and motivations of migrant workers is also critical. Investigating factors such as age, gender, family structure, and long-term career aspirations would offer a more complete picture of their role in U.S. agriculture. Additionally, research into the impact of immigration policies on migrant workers' decisions could inform policies aimed at stabilizing the workforce and ensuring the continued success of the agricultural industry (Chen, 2025). Potential research also needs to be conducted to understand the differences between the H-2A and TN visa programs to help in determining the most appropriate uses for each program.

Finally, research should explore alternative labor models to reduce dependence on migrant labor. This could include studying the potential of automation and technological advancements in agriculture, as well as exploring local workforce development programs to attract domestic workers to agricultural jobs (Vaughn et al., 2019). Additionally, investigating the effects of climate change on labor demand, as well as the broader implications of immigration enforcement policies on migrant labor availability, is crucial for anticipating future labor shortages or surpluses (Kostandini et al., 2014).

By incorporating these research avenues, policymakers, farmers, and labor advocates can develop more effective strategies to address the challenges surrounding migrant labor in agriculture. As Ford and Learner (1992) emphasized, understanding the interconnectedness of

systems and the broader social and economic context is essential for developing sustainable solutions that benefit both agricultural producers and migrant workers alike.

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CHAPTER 3

THE WORK BEHIND THE WORKFORCE: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF JOB AND CAREER CHALLENGES IN H-2A CONTRACT WORK

Abstract

This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of migrant labor contractors who work in the Southeastern region of the United States. The researcher employed a phenomenological approach grounded in Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology to explore our central research question: *How do H-2A contractors experience agricultural migrant labor challenges in their work?* Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with four migrant labor contractors. Preliminary findings revealed that contractors face significant challenges, including bureaucratic hurdles, discrimination against laborers, inadequate housing, restrictive regulations that do not align with practical needs, and unanticipated costs. These challenges highlight the need for policy reforms to address the regulatory and logistical barriers faced by contractors. The study concludes that regulatory changes are necessary to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of migrant labor programs. Incorporating contractors into the discussion by exploring their distinct experiences with the challenges of the migrant labor system can positively contribute to efforts and reforms aimed at ensuring the long-term viability and sustainability of the agricultural labor system. Future research should focus on examining the impact of specific policies on labor contractors, exploring potential solutions to the identified challenges, and evaluating the long-term effects of these changes on the agricultural labor force.

Introduction and Review of Literature

Migrant labor contractors play critical roles in the agriculture industry by recruiting, transporting, and managing temporary or seasonal workers (Alves Pena, 2012; Castillo et al., 2022; Martin, 1996). Contractors are typically individuals or companies that specialize in recruiting and managing temporary agricultural workers, which is a group often comprised of migrant laborers. Specifically, contractors help facilitate the supply of labor for key planting, harvesting, and processing tasks by serving as intermediaries between growers/farmers and the migrant workers they hire.

Migrant labor contractors rely upon a variety of means to successfully recruit and retain the workforce needed to fill labor gaps. Contractors often come from the same communities as the workers they recruit and may leverage personal connections and their own cultural knowledge to aid them in identifying and screening potential workers (Alves Pena, 2012). Many contractors also have long-standing relationships with networks of migrant laborers, which can allow them to tap into established pipelines of available workers. Lastly, contractors may also collaborate with labor organizations and advocacy groups that connect them with individuals seeking agricultural employment opportunities. (Eckstein & Peri, 2018).

Beyond recruitment responsibilities, migrant labor contractors are responsible for managing the labor force they recruit, which can pose challenges. Management responsibilities leading up to the contracted job typically include facilitating the logistics of getting workers to job sites, arranging transportation services to move laborers from their home communities to the farms and processing facilities where they are needed, arranging for housing accommodations, and arranging meals to support workers during their periods of employment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024). Once the workers are on the job, migrant labor contractors take on a

range of human resource responsibilities. They handle payroll, timekeeping, and other administrative tasks to ensure the temporary workforce is properly compensated and documented (Wall, 2023). Contractors also organize work crews, monitor productivity, and address any issues or concerns that arise among the workers they have supplied. Underlying all of these functions is the contractors' role in ensuring regulatory compliance. They must be knowledgeable of relevant labor laws and regulations, such as minimum wage requirements, worker safety standards, and restrictions on child labor (Martin, 1996). Adhering to these rules is crucial for both protecting the migrant workers and maintaining the legality of the agricultural operations they support.

Through this multifaceted approach, migrant labor contractors serve as essential intermediaries, bridging the labor needs of growers and farmers with the availability of temporary workers from migrant communities (Eckstein & Peri, 2016). Their ability to recruit, transport, and manage this workforce is undeniably critical to the agricultural sector's productivity and success. However, the migrant labor system has been the subject of scrutiny, with concerns raised about potential exploitation, substandard working conditions, and lack of oversight (Keller et al., 2016). Such scrutiny, along with obstacles inherent to the policies and procedures of migrant labor programs, pose significant challenges to migrant labor contractors in effectively recruiting and managing migrant workers. Further, these challenges may add on-the-job stress and long-term survivability on the job (Magnano et al., 2021). As labor programs could not run efficiently without contractors, research is needed to identify obstacles or other stressors contractors experience on the job. At the time this study was conducted, no known research to examine the experiences of U.S. migrant labor contractors was available.

Theoretical Framework

The Developmental Systems Theory (DST), (Ford & Lerner, 1992) offers a systems perspective through which we may be able to better understand the experiences of migrant labor contractors. DST emphasizes how a development as a dynamic process in which interacting systems direct a person's development. Development is referred to as the process in which different systems will change and adapt to challenges overtime as needed. The implications for social science are found examining behaviors and recognizing the role of contextual factors in shaping that behavior. Moreover, from a broader systems perspective, we can consider the human experience as one nestled within individual, group, organization, community, and societal levels of a system. As such, a key tenant of DST is that development does not follow a fixed path; rather, individuals may navigate diverse trajectories based on their unique backgrounds and circumstances. Although shared communal and contextual influences may exist within a population, individual pathways are varied and cannot be predicted with certainty. This open-ended nature of development means numerous factors influence experiences and future outcomes. The theory also emphasizes equifinality, suggesting that multiple developmental routes can lead to similar outcomes, thereby accommodating the complexity of human experience (Ford & Lerner, 1992). This specific concept focuses on environmental constraints, task-related constraints, and constraints inherent to the individual that impact their ability to perform a behavior.

This theory was originally developed for use in medical research, particularly in the area of motor skill development. However, more recently, DST has been applied in social science settings to examine constraints that impact performative behaviors (Becker Herbst & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2016). Becker Herbst and Gonzalez-Guarda (2016) applied DST along with

considerations of well-being to explore factors that influenced the well-being of Latina/o migrant workers in the United States. Specifically, the researchers used a community-based qualitative approach to describe the factors impacting their well-being. Their framework recognized development as a dynamic and reciprocal process shaped by an interplay of individual, communal, and contextual factors. When applied to the context of migrant labor communities and the lived experiences of migrant labor contractors, individual factors pertain to demographic characteristics of contractors, communal characteristics may include those related to community-level or cultural processes, and contextual factors refer to macro-level environmental factors under which contractors operate. Together, these factors can provide insight into the system in which migrant contractors operate and help us understand *how* contractors experience challenges associated with migrant labor work.

Purpose and Central Research Question

This research was conducted to enhance our understanding of the migrant labor system in the Southeastern region of the United States. Migrant labor contractors are a major actor in a migrant labor system subject to environmental, political, and social influences. Through programs like H-2A, farm labor contractors often serve as coordinators between farmers and seasonal migrant workers. Incorporating contractors into the discussion by exploring their distinct experiences with the challenges of the migrant labor system can positively contribute to efforts and reforms aimed at ensuring the long-term viability and sustainability of the agricultural labor system. The central research question that guided this study was: *How do H-2A contractors experience agricultural migrant labor challenges in their work?*

Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological approach grounded in Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology (1994), which uses epoche (bracketing), reduction, textural and structural descriptions and synthesizing findings, to explore the lived experiences of contractors involved in migrant labor programs in the Southeastern United States. The goal was to understand how these contractors navigate complex issues of wage demand and financial resource availability, lack of resources, immigration enforcement, and bureaucratic challenges. The phenomenological approach emphasizes the subjective nature of human experiences and aims to uncover the meanings individuals attach to their lived realities (Creswell, 2013).

Participant Selection

The researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select participants directly involved in managing or overseeing migrant labor programs in the Southeastern United States. Due to the lack of available contact information, contractors were selected with the help of Southeastern producers. Southeastern users of migrant labor were first contacted using previously formed industry connections and inquired about the possibility of their contractors participating in these interviews while the contractors were in the U.S. during the harvesting process. Once one contractor confirmed participation, the researcher could acquire further participation from other contractors who trusted the initial participant's judgment. In total, four contractors were interviewed, with an effort to ensure diversity in the sample based on factors such as the size of the company, geographical location within the Southeastern United States, and years of experience in the field. The researcher excluded individuals who did not meet these criteria or could not provide informed consent.

Eligibility criteria for participation included:

1. Primary involvement in migrant labor programs (all participants were required to work in the contractor role)
2. At least one year of experience working within such programs.
3. Experience operating on agricultural operations within the Southeastern U.S.
4. Fluency in English (this was determined by initial conversation between the researcher and the participant)
5. Willingness to participate in a 30–60-minute semi-structured interview.
6. Ability to provide in-depth responses

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, phone-based interviews, and participants were chosen for their flexibility and ability to provide in-depth responses. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was conducted by a trained researcher (the lead author), who followed a semi-structured interview guide to ensure consistency across interviews while allowing space for participants to share their experiences on their terms.

The interview guide consisted of broad, open-ended questions to encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences and the meaning they attached to them (see Appendix X). Sample questions included: “Describe your role as a migrant labor contractor” “How many migrant laborers do you contract?” “Are there any challenges that you face while in the U.S.?” These interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy of participants' responses. Transcriptions were then anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Following Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenology, a systematic approach was used for data analysis, which included four phases: epoche (bracketing), reduction, textural and structural descriptions, and synthesizing findings. The researcher also built credibility, ethics, and trustworthiness into the study as standards for rigor. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was employed, in which I consulted with a subset of participants to confirm accuracy and resonance of our results (Creswell, 2013). A limitation of this study is found in the single source of data collection, which was the interviews with contractors. As contractors are domestic migrant workers and travel from region to region, field observations were not possible in a time frame fitting with the study. Another limitation for this study was that only four contractors participated in this study. This due to the fact that contractors are very difficult to get a hold of and they are not necessarily open to participating in studies of this kind.

To ensure the integrity and validity of the study, the analysis process began with *epoche* or bracketing. This required the researcher who conducted the interviews to set aside preconceived beliefs, biases, or assumptions about the phenomenon. I engaged in self-reflection and documented their thoughts and perspectives on migrant labor programs to identify and minimize any potential influence on the analysis process (Creswell, 2013). Bracketing was revisited throughout the study to ensure the researchers remained attuned to participants' experiences rather than their own. From growing up on her family's farm, the lead researcher was already exposed to migrant labor and had gained some understanding of the challenges faced by migrant labor contractors before starting the data analysis.

The second step in the phenomenological analysis is *reduction*, where the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts in detail. Each transcript was read multiple times to identify significant statements or phrases directly related to the participants' experiences. The researcher then employed horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994), where all statements relevant to the phenomenon were treated as having equal importance. These significant statements were then grouped into meaning units or themes that reflected the core elements of the participants' experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Once the meaning units were identified, the researcher began synthesizing them into composite *textural and structural descriptions*. The textural description answers the question: *What* did participants experience? It describes the essence of the participants' lived experiences related to their involvement in migrant labor programs. The structural description answers the question: *How* did participants experience the phenomenon? It explains the context, conditions, and factors that shaped their perceptions and actions (Moustakas, 1994). For instance, a structural description might explore how specific cultural practices or organizational structures influenced contractors' responses to challenges.

Finally, after developing textural and structural descriptions for each participant, the researcher *synthesized* these individual accounts into a composite description that captures the essence of the contractors' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This composite description highlights the shared and unique aspects of the contractors' lived realities, providing a rich, multi-dimensional understanding of their experiences in migrant labor programs (Creswell, 2013). See **Table 1** for descriptions of each methodology step.

Table 1. *Overview of Moustaka's phenomenological process*

Phase	Description
Bracketing	Bracketing involves acknowledging and suspending all prior knowledge and beliefs about the phenomenon to allow for a fresh, unbiased perspective.
Reduction	Engaging deeply with the experience, allowing the researcher to fully immerse themselves in the phenomenon and understand it from a first-person perspective.
Textual and Structural Descriptions	Identifying recurring themes, patterns, and structures within the collected data, focusing on the "essence" of the experience.
Composite Description	Articulating the findings in a rich, detailed, and narrative form, capturing the meaning and significance of the lived experience.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines for qualitative research. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board (UTK IRB-24-08367-XM). All participants provided consent and were assured of their responses' confidentiality and anonymity. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study without consequence. Data were stored securely, and all identifying information was removed from interview transcripts. To maintain confidentiality, only aggregated data and composite descriptions were included in the final report.

Participant Breakdown

Four labor contractors participated in this study. These contractors had been in the industry for 22 to 35 years and all worked primarily with fruit and vegetable growers. Their primary job tasks were to coordinate labor to harvest crops that have a relatively high labor demand, such as watermelons, squash, carrots, and corn. The average crew size run by these contractors ranged from 300 to 2,000 migrant laborers during a single harvest season.

- Tyler- This participant is a well-known contractor throughout the fruit and vegetable industry. This participant was chosen due to their many years of knowledge and experience with contracting migrant labor. With this experience, Tyler brought a great deal of perspective to the table as this person is already working to help better prepare the next generation of migrant labor contractors.
- Matthew- This participant is a contractor who does not handle as many farms as the other participants at one time but has continued to have success within the industry. This participant was chosen due to their positive reputation with producers.

- Randy- This participant is a contractor who was chosen due to the struggles they have faced while operating as a migrant labor contractor. This participant is well known for standing up for the rights of his workers and making sure that discrimination against laborers is not ignored.
- Lucas- This participant is a contractor who has spent a great deal of time operating and managing migrant labor in not just the Southeast, but across the country. This participant was able to give a perspective from multiple points of view, having worked in a variety of roles.

Results

The reduction of significant statements across respondents revealed several key shared challenges faced by contractors working with migrant labor, with recurring themes of lack of resources, bureaucratic challenges and immigration enforcement, wage demand and lack of financial resource availability, and the stigma surrounding migrant labor. These issues all appeared to create operational difficulties for contractors and contribute to broader tensions within the community and industry. How contractors in our study experienced these challenges is described in the following sections.

Lack of Resources

A primary concern voiced by all contractors was the challenge of securing adequate housing for their migrant laborers. The difficulty of finding housing that is both affordable and willing to accommodate the short-term nature of migrant labor contracts was identified as a consistent issue. As contractors often rely on temporary workers for specific projects or seasonal demands, the short-term leases these workers require clash with the longer-term rental market, predominantly oriented toward permanent tenants. This mismatch in housing demand and

availability led to various logistical complications for our contractors. Tyler elaborated on the scale of this challenge, stating, "With the large number of people we carry, it is tough to get housing for these many people for such a short period." In regions where housing is already in short supply or particularly expensive, contractors often compete with residents, exacerbating the problem. In some cases, this shortage has forced contractors to settle for substandard living conditions for their workers, further contributing to tensions between the contractors, their employees, and the surrounding community. The result is a precarious balance between meeting the immediate housing needs of migrant workers and the economic realities of the housing market.

Additionally, the cost of housing often becomes a financial burden that contractors are forced to absorb, sometimes at the expense of other operational costs. This creates a knock-on effect on the overall project budget and, in some cases, the feasibility of bringing in migrant labor altogether. In extreme cases, contractors have been forced to abandon projects or reduce the number of workers brought in, which can lead to delays, reduced productivity, or suboptimal project outcomes. Matthew pointed out, "a lot of hotels, a lot of trailer parks either they're not certified for H-2A, or they just don't want to deal with you, period."

Bureaucratic Challenges and Immigration Enforcement

Bureaucratic inefficiencies were another significant source of frustration for contractors. These issues stem from the regulatory framework governing the movement of migrant workers, particularly when crossing state lines. Contractors noted that the paperwork required for each worker every time they move between states — including petitions, forms, and approvals — was often burdensome and time-consuming. The process is designed to ensure compliance with federal and state labor laws. However, contractors see it as an outdated and inefficient system

that does not align with the realities of modern labor markets. Tyler went on to explain this idea by sharing, “These regulations that the government is putting for this H-2A program, a lot of them don't fit our category or our style of job that we carry.”

The need to obtain state-specific approvals for each migrant worker, sometimes within a very short time frame, is particularly challenging during peak demand periods when contractors may be scrambling to hire and deploy workers quickly. "It feels like a full-time job just filling out the paperwork," Randy explained, noting the impact of this inefficiency on their ability to manage a project effectively. Additionally, the lack of synchronization between different regulatory agencies or varying state laws can result in delays, compliance risks, and additional costs. Contractors shared that the administrative burden takes away valuable time and resources that are better spent on more immediate operational concerns, such as coordinating labor or managing production schedules. This bureaucratic backlog has sometimes led to legal challenges or penalties, putting further strain on already stretched-thin contractors.

Wage Demand and Lack of Financial Resource Availability

While wage increases for migrant laborers are seen as an important improvement for workers, they have created a significant point of contention among contractors and producers. The introduction of higher wages has led to concerns over the financial viability of relying on migrant labor. While many contractors supported paying migrant workers more, they also worried that these wage increases could significantly affect their bottom lines, particularly for smaller contractors or those operating in lower-margin industries. Randy went on to share, “I think the pay definitely concerns anybody because now we have to charge more to the farmer and we have to pay more to the contractor you know workmen’s comp also jumps in and you know they will they're good so definitely the money the money mark has to I wish you could

just stop somewhere but it seems like in every year it's going up enough and for a beginner it's it would be very hard to place that.”

For contractors in highly competitive sectors where labor costs account for a large portion of the overall expenses, rising wages could mean the difference between profitability and financial instability. Matthew voiced his concern: "If wages keep increasing at this pace, I may not be able to afford to bring in migrant labor anymore, no matter how much I need it." Additionally, there is a concern that higher wages could create a cascading effect where labor costs increase across the entire industry, driving up costs for all contractors and potentially making it more difficult to secure sufficient labor at competitive rates. This could reduce the availability of labor for some businesses or result in companies having to cut back on workers or reduce their workforce, which in turn may lead to project delays and lost revenue. Matthew had a lot to say about this in stating, “it has been a big challenge trying to make it work for us as well as for the farmers to keep it at a cost that works for all of us when this average wage is really high...I don't see it [wage increase] stopping from going any higher... regulating these H-2A adverse wage because I mean there's going to come a point that we're not going to be able to do it anymore.”

Stigma Surrounding Migrant Labor

Another significant challenge faced by contractors working with migrant labor is the stigma that often accompanies the employment of non-local workers. This stigma can take many forms and is felt differently by each contractor, but it commonly manifests in two primary ways: community resistance and government inefficiencies.

Tyler described facing strong pushback from local communities that were resistant to the influx of non-local workers. This resistance could range from overt

hostility to more subtle forms of exclusion, such as a lack of community accommodation or services tailored to migrant workers. These workers, often seen as outsiders, may face difficulties integrating into the local community, and the communities themselves may harbor misconceptions about the economic or social impact of migrant labor. Randy even went on to explain this in detail stating, “One of the big problems that we face in Texas is the local state. They're just, they're not very welcoming of people that are not from Texas being in that state.” A toxic environment creates tension between contractors, their workers, and the surrounding population. Lucas stated, “The biggest challenge for someone is understanding the culture of the worker, of the migrant worker, and getting the farmers to trust that they're going to get the job done.”

On the other hand, contractors also face significant bureaucratic inefficiencies within government agencies that hinder their ability to comply with legal requirements. Lucas expressed frustration about their experience with local offices, saying, "We are trying to do everything by the law, but we have these offices that either want to keep rescheduling you or do not want to see you." The inability to efficiently process documentation or obtain required certifications, such as social security verification or work permits, creates significant delays and administrative burdens. These inefficiencies often result in contractors facing legal hurdles or financial penalties, which compound their difficulties in managing their workforce.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Migrant labor contractors play a pivotal role in supporting the agricultural sector by bridging the labor gap during peak harvest times. However, as research from Schewe and White (2017) and Stephens et al. (2024) revealed, the rising reliance on migrant labor presents several

challenges, such as bureaucratic hurdles, logistical burdens, and financial strain. These challenges not only affect contractors but also ripple through the entire agricultural industry, impacting workers and producers alike. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (2023) further underscored the increasing dependence on migrant labor, noting a dramatic rise in certified migrant labor positions from 48,000 to 371,000 over the past 17 years. Despite these difficulties, contractors continue to emphasize the growing need for migrant labor to address domestic labor shortages, highlighting the interconnected nature of these challenges.

The Developmental Systems Theory (DST) provides valuable insight into these complexities, suggesting that individuals' development is shaped by multiple interacting systems, including individual, group, and societal levels (Ford & Lerner, 1992). In the case of migrant labor contractors in our study, factors such as demographic characteristics, community ties, and economic and regulatory contexts interacted dynamically to shape their experiences. Addressing both individual and systemic factors is crucial to creating a more supportive environment for contractors and their workforces. For instance, bureaucratic obstacles, such as delays in worker documentation and restrictions on labor mobility, were compounded by societal stigma and negative perceptions of migrant labor for our contractors. This finding is consistent with prior research focused on other actors within the migrant labor system (Alves Pena, 2012). Streamlining administrative processes and involving contractors in policy discussions are key steps toward alleviating their burdens.

To improve the conditions for migrant labor contractors and the agricultural industry, policymakers could address several key issues. First, they could simplify the regulatory framework for migrant workers, such as streamlining paperwork for workers crossing state lines. Understanding the communal and contextual factors affecting migrant laborers, as emphasized

by Becker Herbst and Gonzalez-Guarda (2016), is essential in designing policies that both support contractors and protect workers. Additionally, improving access to affordable, short-term housing for temporary workers in areas with high labor demand would alleviate one of the most pressing logistical concerns. Addressing wage dynamics, including providing wage subsidies or financial assistance to smaller agricultural producers, would help mitigate the rising costs of labor and prevent smaller operations from being priced out of the market.

Another key issue is the impact of social stigma and discrimination on migrant labor contractors and workers. Negative perceptions of migrant labor, often rooted in racial and national prejudices, exacerbate contractors' difficulties in managing legal complexities and fluctuating labor demands (Eckstein & Peri, 2018). Public education campaigns and community engagement efforts are needed to reduce misunderstandings and promote more inclusive attitudes. These efforts should focus on changing the narrative around migrant labor by highlighting both the contributions of migrant workers to the agricultural economy and the challenges faced by contractors. As DST suggests, attitudes are shaped by a complex interplay of individual, communal, and contextual factors, and changing them requires a multi-level approach.

Future Research Topics

Future research on migrant labor contractors should explore several critical areas to deepen our understanding and inform more effective policies. One important area is the social dynamics that contribute to the stigma surrounding migrant labor. Studies should examine the root causes of discrimination—whether based on race, nationality, or economic fears—to better understand how these factors shape public perceptions and contribute to social exclusion. Investigating community narratives and societal attitudes

toward migrant labor will be important in developing strategies to combat negative stereotypes and improve community integration. As Eckstein and Peri (2018) note, societal stigma can exacerbate contractors' difficulties, suggesting that public education and community engagement initiatives should be part of policy efforts.

Another promising avenue for research is the economic challenges faced by both contractors and agricultural producers. Research into how fluctuations in migrant labor wages impact smaller farms, especially those operating with limited resources, could inform more equitable wage policies. Understanding the financial pressures contractors and producers face will be important for designing policies that support both groups while ensuring fair compensation for workers. Wage subsidies or targeted financial assistance for smaller operations could help alleviate the financial burden and prevent them from being priced out of the labor market (Martin, 1996). An intersectional approach to studying migrant workers' experiences is also needed, particularly one that considers factors such as gender, age, and immigration status. This approach would provide critical insights into the additional layers of vulnerability and discrimination within the migrant labor system (Becker Herbst & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2016). This could lead to more targeted policies that address the unique needs of these groups.

Research should also examine the role of contractors in navigating the legal complexities, fluctuating labor demands, and administrative burdens associated with the movement of migrant workers. Studies focusing on the legal landscape, including delays in worker documentation and restrictions on labor mobility, could offer valuable insights into how the system can be streamlined to reduce inefficiencies. Future studies should explore how these legal and regulatory barriers intersect with individual, community, and

societal factors, as outlined in the Developmental Systems Theory (Ford & Lerner, 1992). Understanding these dynamics could help inform policy reforms that make the system more flexible and less burdensome for contractors.

Additionally, it is essential to investigate the long-term impacts of migrant labor on contractors' well-being, job satisfaction, and work-life balance. Given the demanding nature of their work and the socio-political challenges they face, contractors may experience significant stress and burnout. Understanding how these stressors impact contractors' mental health, career longevity, and overall job satisfaction will be critical for developing support systems and interventions that improve the work environment for contractors (Becker Herbst & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2016).

Finally, research should focus on creating sustainable and flexible labor policies that address the realities of migrant labor. By integrating the voices of contractors, workers, farmers, and local communities into policy discussions, research can help create a more equitable and efficient agricultural labor system. A systems-level approach, as outlined in Developmental Systems Theory, can ensure that future policy reforms are comprehensive and better suited to the needs of all stakeholders involved (Ford & Lerner, 1992). By addressing these critical areas, researchers can provide valuable insights that will help inform policies aimed at creating a more inclusive, sustainable, and efficient agricultural labor system in the U.S.

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CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Reliance on Migrant Labor in U.S. Agriculture

Agricultural producers, from dairy farms to fruit and vegetable operations, are increasingly dependent on migrant labor to meet the seasonal and year-round demands of their industries. This dependence is particularly evident in operations like Connection Dairies, Extravagant Melon Company, and Gonzales Farm Service, where migrant workers perform a wide range of tasks—caring for livestock, harvesting crops, and packing and distributing produce. Migrant workers are essential for maintaining operational efficiency in these industries, especially given the high physical demands and seasonal fluctuations of farm work. As Rihn et al. (2022) and Rutledge and Taylor (2019) have noted, local workers are often unwilling or unavailable for these demanding, seasonal roles, pushing farmers to rely more heavily on migrant labor.

Migrant Labor in Agricultural Operations

Migrant workers enter the U.S. through visa programs like the H-2A and TN programs, providing the workforce necessary for large-scale agricultural operations. The tasks performed by these workers require not only physical endurance but also flexibility to adapt to varying work schedules based on seasonal cycles. Despite the critical role that migrant labor plays, the domestic workforce is often not suited to these positions due to the high physical demands and seasonal instability of farm work (Castillo et al., 2022; Rutledge & Taylor, 2019). Without a stable and reliable labor force, many farms would struggle to operate effectively, especially during peak production periods.

While migrant labor is vital to farm productivity, it comes with significant challenges, particularly surrounding the bureaucratic processes of securing and renewing work visas. As both melon producers and dairy farm managers have shared, delays in visa approvals, inefficiencies in processing, and potential denials of visa renewals can severely disrupt farm operations, especially during critical seasonal periods. Moreover, the rising cost of migrant labor, particularly in the context of increasing rates for H-2A workers, is putting a strain on farm finances. These rising costs, combined with the seasonal nature of farm work, force producers to make difficult decisions regarding labor force size and compensation (Mercier, 2014; Williams, 2018).

The agricultural market's volatility and tight profit margins only exacerbate these financial pressures. Farmers also face difficulties attracting reliable and motivated local workers, as the seasonal and physically demanding nature of farm labor, along with the lack of long-term job security, make it challenging to recruit a domestic workforce (Castillo et al., 2022). These realities reinforce the reliance on migrant labor as a necessary and often irreplaceable component of modern agriculture.

Migrant labor contractors serve a pivotal role by addressing the labor shortages during peak harvest periods. However, as research by Schewe and White (2017) and Stephens et al. (2024) demonstrates, the growing reliance on migrant labor brings forth several challenges, including bureaucratic hurdles, logistical burdens, and financial strain. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (2023) has highlighted the increasing dependence on migrant labor, with the number of certified migrant labor positions rising dramatically from 48,000 to 371,000 over the past 17 years. Despite these growing challenges, labor contractors continue to emphasize the essential role of migrant labor in alleviating domestic labor shortages.

Theoretical Application

The complexities of the migrant labor system, particularly regarding the H-2A visa process, can be better understood through the lens of broader systemic interactions. As Irlbeck (2023) points out, addressing these challenges requires an understanding of how individual, group, and societal factors interconnect and influence experiences. Ford and Lerner (1992) also provide valuable insight into the dynamics at play, suggesting that the development of individuals and groups is shaped by interactions within broader societal systems.

For example, farm operations like Gonzales Farm Service face logistical issues due to the uncertainty surrounding visa approvals, which disrupt the flow of labor and hinder farm operations. These challenges are compounded by societal stigma surrounding migrant labor, which affects both workers and contractors (Alves Pena, 2012). Streamlining bureaucratic processes, improving communication with contractors, and involving them in policy discussions could help alleviate some of the burdens that arise from this complex system.

Policy Recommendations

To better support migrant labor contractors and the agricultural sector, policymakers could focus on simplifying the regulatory framework governing migrant labor. Streamlining paperwork for workers crossing state lines and improving access to affordable, short-term housing for temporary workers in areas with high labor demand would alleviate some of the logistical challenges faced by farmers. Additionally, addressing wage dynamics through wage subsidies or financial assistance to smaller agricultural producers could help mitigate the rising costs of labor, ensuring that small farms are not priced out of the market (Becker Herbst & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2016).

One significant policy reform would be expanding the H-2A visa program to include dairy workers. Currently, dairy farming is excluded from the program due to its classification as a non-seasonal operation. Expanding the program to accommodate dairy workers would ensure that farms like Connection Dairies could access the year-round labor they require. Furthermore, streamlining the H-2A application and renewal processes would reduce delays and inefficiencies, enabling farm operations to better manage their workforce. As both dairy and melon producers express concern over potential changes to immigration policy, there is growing fear that legislative changes may limit farm access to the labor force they rely on. As Kostandini et al. (2014) and Ford & Lerner (1992) have noted, uncertainty in immigration policies creates an unstable environment for agricultural producers, who are already grappling with challenges like climate change, fluctuating market prices, and rising production costs. In response to these concerns, reforms to the H-2A program that address rising labor costs and ensure more predictable access to workers could provide a much-needed solution for producers (Irlbeck, 2023; Martin & Rutledge, 2021).

A more predictable and efficient labor pipeline could significantly alleviate the stress that agricultural producers face annually. Simplifying the application process, eliminating unnecessary delays, and providing clearer guidance for farmers and labor contractors would offer greater stability to the agricultural sector. A streamlined process would allow farms to better plan and allocate resources, helping them avoid disruptions in labor supply and maintain productivity.

Future Research

To fully address the challenges associated with migrant labor, future research should focus on several key areas. First, examining the economic impact of the H-2A visa program on agricultural producers and migrant workers will provide valuable insights into how rising labor costs and bureaucratic inefficiencies affect farm profitability and operational efficiency. Additionally, research should explore the demographic composition and motivations of migrant workers, such as age, gender, and long-term career aspirations, to offer a more comprehensive understanding of their role in U.S. agriculture (Chen, 2025).

Further research is also needed to examine the social dynamics of migrant labor, particularly the stigma and discrimination faced by workers. By understanding the root causes of hostility toward migrant labor—whether based on race, nationality, or economic fears—policymakers can develop strategies to combat prejudice and improve working conditions for these essential workers. Furthermore, exploring alternative labor models, such as automation and local workforce development programs, may help reduce the agricultural sector's reliance on migrant labor (Vaughn et al., 2019).

Migrant labor remains an integral part of U.S. agriculture, providing a stable and adaptable workforce necessary for maintaining productivity in the face of seasonal demands. While the system has its challenges, particularly around visa processing, rising costs, and societal stigma, addressing these issues through policy reform, improved regulatory processes, and better support for labor contractors can help stabilize the agricultural workforce.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: Needs and Challenges Associated with the Use of Migrant Labor in Southeastern U.S. Agricultural Operations

Researcher(s):

Makenzie Smith, University of Tennessee, Knoxville TN

Shelli Rampold (Faculty Advisor), University of Tennessee, Knoxville TN

Tom Gill, University of Tennessee, Knoxville TN

Emily Paskewitz, University of Tennessee, Knoxville TN

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are a migrant labor contractor who oversees migrant labor program(s) within the Southeastern region of the United States. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study. This information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to help us better understand the need for migrant labor in agricultural production, as well as identify challenges related to migrant labor. Your responses about your perceptions and experiences will help us better support agricultural producers, migrant labor programs, and our food and fiber system overall.

How long will I be in the research study?
--

If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in a single phone interview that will take no more than one hour of your time.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?
--

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in the interview where you will describe your experiences as a labor contractor and challenges you have experienced or foresee experiencing in the future. Interviews will be recorded, and the audio files will be sent to a transcription service. All identifying information will be removed.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact the PI and all information we collected will be deleted. After six months following your interview, we will be unable to delete your data contribution to the written pieces of the project since this data is part of a Master's Thesis project, which will have been submitted by that time.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

There is a possibility that you may benefit from being in the study, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Possible benefits include receiving support through Extension services to help address any challenges you mentioned. Even if you don't benefit from being in the study, your participation may help us to learn more about how we can best support our farmers, laborers, and managers during a time where labor shortages have impacted the agricultural sector. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by allowing raw transcripts of interviews to be seen **only** by the researchers listed on this study. We will remove all identifiers.

Recorded data will be transcribed using Landmark Transcription Services, and user data may be used for machine learning for the purposes of testing, tuning, optimizing, validating, or otherwise enhancing the AI tool that powers the service. Please note that Landmark may update their Terms of Service without notifying the investigators or you, which may affect how your data is stored in the future.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is **unlikely**, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

To protect those you work with, we ask that you do not name any of your employees/workers at any time during this interview.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study. We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Makenzie Smith at msmit556@vols.utk.edu or Dr. Shelli Rampold at srampold@utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date
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Consent for Research Participation

Research Study Title: Needs and Challenges Associated with the Use of Migrant Labor in Southeastern U.S. Agricultural Operations

Researcher(s):

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Tom Gill, University of Tennessee, Knoxville TN

Emily Paskewitz, University of Tennessee, Knoxville TN

Why am I being asked to be in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this research study because you are either a fruit and vegetable, livestock, or row crop/forage producer in the Southeastern region of the United States. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study. This information in this consent form is to help you decide if you want to be in this research study. Please take your time reading this form and contact the researcher(s) to ask questions if there is anything you do not understand.

What is this research study about?

The purpose of the research study is to help us better understand the need for migrant labor in agricultural production, as well as identify challenges our farmers face related to migrant labor. Your responses about your perceptions and experiences will help us better support agricultural producers and our food and fiber system.

How long will I be in the research study?
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If you agree to participate in this study, you will participate in a single interview that will take no more than one hour of your time.

What will happen if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research study”?
--

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to participate in the interview where you will describe your farming operation and your perceptions of and experiences with migrant labor use. Interviews will be recorded, and the audio files will be sent to a transcription service. All identifying information will be removed.

What happens if I say “No, I do not want to be in this research study”?
--

Being in this study is up to you. You can say no now or leave the study later. Either way, your decision won't affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Tennessee.

What happens if I say “Yes” but change my mind later?

Even if you decide to be in the study now, you can change your mind and stop at any time.

If you decide to stop before the study is completed, please contact the PI and all information we collected will be deleted. After six months following your interview, we will be unable to delete your data contribution to the written pieces of the project since this data is part of a Master’s Thesis project, which will have been submitted by that time.

Are there any possible risks to me?

It is possible that someone could find out you were in this study or see your study information, but we believe this risk is small because of the procedures we use to protect your information. These procedures are described later in this form.

Are there any benefits to being in this research study?

There is a possibility that you may benefit from being in the study, but there is no guarantee that will happen. Possible benefits include receiving support through Extension services to help address any challenges you mentioned regarding using migrant labor support in your operation. Even if you don’t benefit from being in the study, your participation may help us to learn more about how we can best support our farmers during a time where labor shortages have impacted the agricultural sector. We hope the knowledge gained from this study will benefit others in the future.

Who can see or use the information collected for this research study?

We will protect the confidentiality of your information by allowing raw transcripts of interviews to be seen **only** by the researchers listed on this study. While we will collect information about your operation, we will remove all clear identifiers, such as your name, your farms name, etc. from the transcripts.

If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. Because of the nature of the data analysis in this study, as well as the small nature of the farming community, there is the possibility of your operation being identified through context clues. However, we will use vague terminology in all writings and presentations on the data. For example, an operation would be described as “a small livestock operation in the Southeastern region of the United States,” rather than “a Jersey dairy farm in north Florida.” No direct identifiers will be published.

Recorded data will be transcribed using Landmark Transcription Services, and user data may be used for machine learning for the purposes of testing, tuning, optimizing, validating, or otherwise enhancing the AI tool that powers the service. Please note that Landmark may update their

Terms of Service without notifying the investigators or you, which may affect how your data is stored in the future.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information or what information came from you. Although it is **unlikely**, there are times when others may need to see the information we collect about you. These include:

- People at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville who oversee research to make sure it is conducted properly.
- Government agencies (such as the Office for Human Research Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), and others responsible for watching over the safety, effectiveness, and conduct of the research.
- If a law or court requires us to share the information, we would have to follow that law or final court ruling.

To further protect those you work with, we also ask that at no point during this interview that you name any of your employees/workers.

What will happen to my information after this study is over?

We will not keep your information to use for future research. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from your research data collected as part of the study. We will not share your research data with other researchers.

Will I be paid for being in this research study?

You will not be paid for being in this study.

Will it cost me anything to be in this research study?

It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

Who can answer my questions about this research study?

If you have questions or concerns about this study, or have experienced a research related problem or injury, contact the researchers, Makenzie Smith at msmit556@vols.utk.edu or Dr. Shelli Rampold at srampold@utk.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights or to speak with someone other than the research team about the study, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Phone: 865-974-7697
Email: utkirb@utk.edu

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the chance to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have more questions, I have been told who to contact. By signing this document, I am agreeing to be in this study. I will receive a copy of this document after I sign it.

Name of Adult Participant	Signature of Adult Participant	Date
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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Contractor Interview Protocol

Interviewer: *Reads inform consent; received consent information*

Interviewer: *We are now ready to begin the interview. You do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering, and you can stop and ask for clarification any time you need.*

1. Describe your role as a migrant labor contractor.
 - a. How long have you been a migrant labor contractor?
 - b. What areas of the U.S. do you work in?
 - c. What crops are you familiar with harvesting?
2. How many migrant laborers do you contract?
 - a. What countries do most of your migrant laborers come from?
 - b. Do you have any workers that come back multiple years?
 - c. How many crews do you run at one time?
3. Are there any challenges that you face while in the U.S.?
 - a. If yes, then what are they?
4. What challenges have you faced most?
 - a. Please explain.
 - b. (possible prompt about competing states)
5. What challenges do you see arising over the next ten years?
6. Do you have any concerns with contracting migrant labor in the U.S.?
 - a. If yes, then what are they?
 - b. Do you feel other contractors share these concerns?
7. What will be the biggest challenges for people entering the business of contracting migrant labor?
8. Is there a specific type of legislation that you think could help in lessening challenges?
 - a. If yes, please explain.

Farmer Interview Protocol

Interviewer: *Reads inform consent; received consent information*

Interviewer: *We are now ready to begin the interview. You do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable answering, and you can stop and ask for clarification any time you need.*

1. Tell me about your operation

Prompts:

- a. How long have you been in operation?
- b. How long have you been running the farm?
- c. What do you primarily produce?
- d. What are your different production seasons?

2. Tell me about your employees.

Prompts:

- a. How many employees do you have?
- b. What factors play a role in who you can employ?

3. Do you employ any migrant labor (please describe)?

- a. What does that look like? (Through what program do you hire migrant laborers? H2A? Other?)
- b. Roughly how many migrant laborers do you employ?
- c. How long during each year are they employed?

If yes to migrant labor, ask questions 4-7, and 9

4. Why do you use migrant labor?

- a. Have you experienced any benefits with using migrant labor?

5. Have you experienced any downfalls or challenges with using migrant labor?

- a. If yes, then what are these challenges?

6. How have you tried to overcome these challenges?

- a. What has worked/not worked?

7. **[For both groups]** What challenges do you see producers facing with employing migrant labor over the next ten years?

8. **[If no to migrant labor]** If you don't currently use migrant labor, do you see any potential use in the future?

9. Is there a specific type of legislation that you think could help in lessening challenges?

- a. Please explain

APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL



September 24, 2024

Shelli Danjean Rampold
UTIA - UTIA - ALEC Extension

Re: UTK IRB-24-08367-XM

Study Title: Needs and Challenges Associated with the Use of Migrant Labor in Southeastern U.S. Agricultural Operations

Dear Shelli Danjean Rampold:

The Human Research Protections Program (HRPP) reviewed your application for the above referenced project and determined that your application is eligible for **exempt** review under 45 CFR 46.101. Category 2: Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

Your application has been determined to comply with proper consideration for the rights and welfare of human subjects and the regulatory requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Therefore, this letter constitutes full approval of your application (Version 1.1) as submitted, including:

Documents Stamped:

- Informed Consent – Farmers version 1.0
- Informed Consent – Contractors version 1.0
- MSmith_IRB_Interview Protocol_Farmers version 1.0
- MSmith_IRB_Interview Protocol_Contractors version 1.0
- MSmith_IRB_Recruitment Email_Farmers version 1.0
- MSmith_IRB_Recruitment Email_Contractors version 1.0

Document Acknowledged:

· MSMith_CITI Program Completion Certificate 51742531 version 1.0

That have been dated and stamped IRB approved. You are approved to enroll a maximum of 15 participants. Institutional Review Board | Office of Research & Engagement

1534 White Avenue Knoxville, TN 37996-1529

865-974-7697 865-974-7400 fax irb.utk.edu

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Flagship Campus of the University of Tennessee System 

Approval of this study will be valid from 09/24/2024.

Any revisions in the approved application, consent forms, instruments, recruitment materials, etc., must be submitted to and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. In addition, you are responsible for reporting any unanticipated serious adverse events or other problems involving risks to subjects or others in the manner required by the local IRB policy.

Approval of this study is valid for three years. If a Study Update Form is not submitted in iMedRIS and approved by the IRB prior to 09/23/2027, the study will be automatically closed by the IRB and no further study activity will be permitted until a Study Update Form is received. Please be sure to also submit a Study Closure Request (Form 7) when all research activity, including data analysis, has been completed.

Sincerely,



Lora Beebe, Ph.D., PMHNP-BC, FAAN
Chair

Vita

Makenzie Smith grew up on her family's farm located in Trenton, Florida and has been exposed to various aspects of production agriculture from the time she was born. She will hold a Master of Science in Agricultural Leadership, Education & Communication from The University of Tennessee. Her academic history also includes a Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Communication with a minor in Agri-business from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College. Makenzie has gained valuable work experience in numerous roles including graduate assistantships, shipping logistics management, and legislative assistance. She is an active volunteer with Future Farmers of America events in both Tennessee and South Carolina where she has assisted with numerous responsibilities including event facilitation and competitive team preparation. Makenzie's professional skills range from public speaking to managing event logistics. She is a Gamma Sigma Delta Agriculture Honors Society member, a Smith Center for International Sustainable Agriculture Ambassador, and a National Needs Fellow for International Trade and Development through the Smith Center for International Sustainable Agriculture and the United States Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture.